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THE MAYA ZODIAC AT ACANCEH

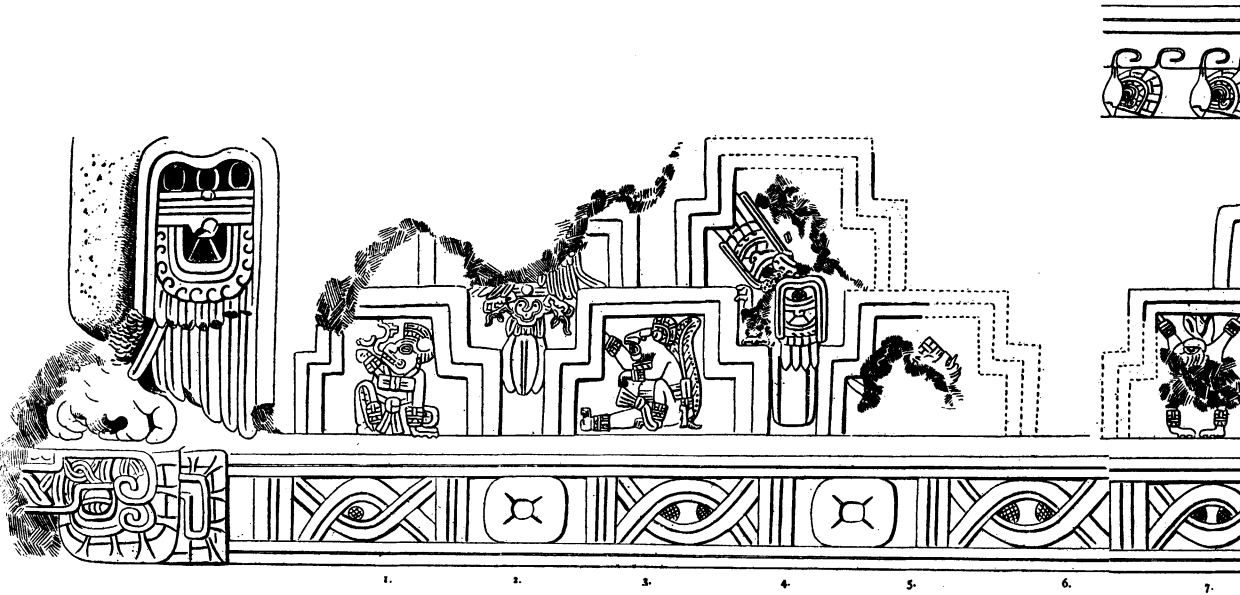
By STANSBURY HAGAR

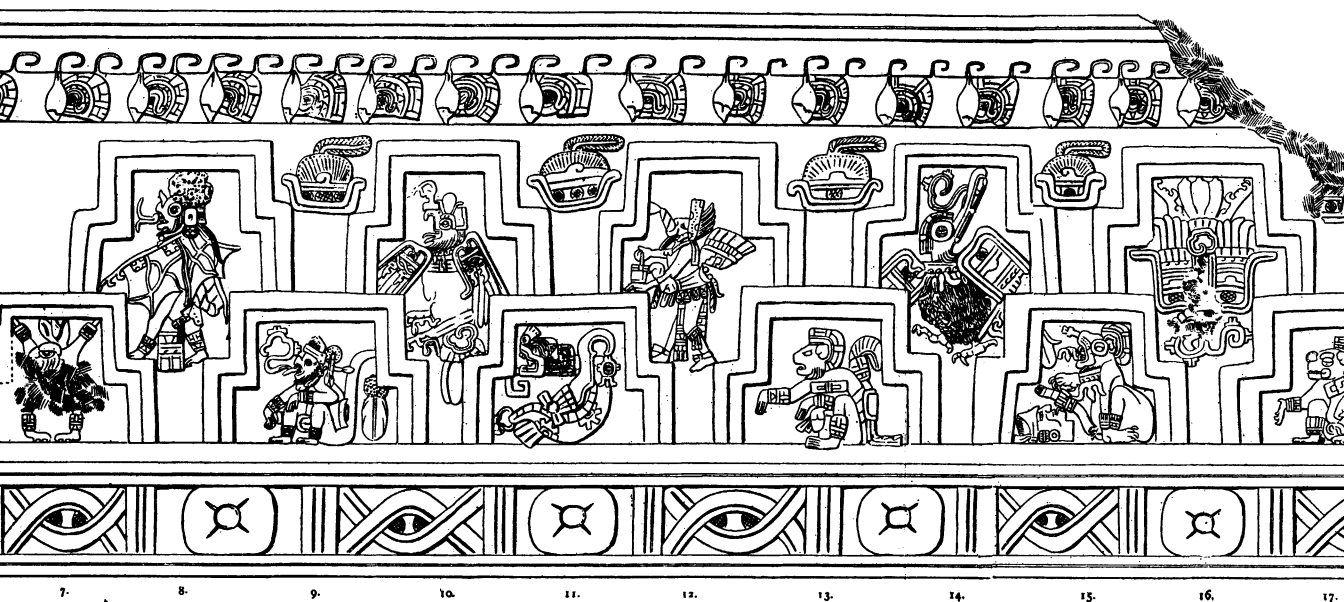
A FEW years ago a wall about forty feet in length and covered with figures in stucco was discovered on the northern side of a mound at Acanceh, Yucatan, one hour's rail journey westward from Mérida. The place was visited and studied by Maler, Miss Adela C. Breton, and Professor and Madame Seler. Photographs of the figures taken by the first and last named visitors are reproduced, with a carefully prepared drawing of the entire wall, in Professor Seler's paper on the subject. Miss Breton has drawn the figures in color and has also published a brief description of the remains.¹ Mrs James of Mérida has also visited and photographed them.

The inscription is divided horizontally into three parts. In the top band there is a series of alternating symbols, probably representing the butterfly, which may be solar, and the stellar eye symbol, which is conspicuous in the Mitla mural paintings.² In the lowest band are alternating symbols of the planet Venus and two intertwined serpentine figures which probably symbolize the year marked by the northward and southward course of the sun along the ecliptic, and its daily course above and below the horizon. But the middle band contains the most important and varied symbols. It is divided into two rows or panels, the form of which cannot easily be described (pl. XI). The lower row contains eleven human and animal figures, while the upper is composed of seven birds and two human figures. All face toward the west, or left, as is usual in Maya inscriptions. Three figures in the upper row have been completely obliterated,—one at each end of the inscription, and the fourth figure from the western end,—so there seem to have been

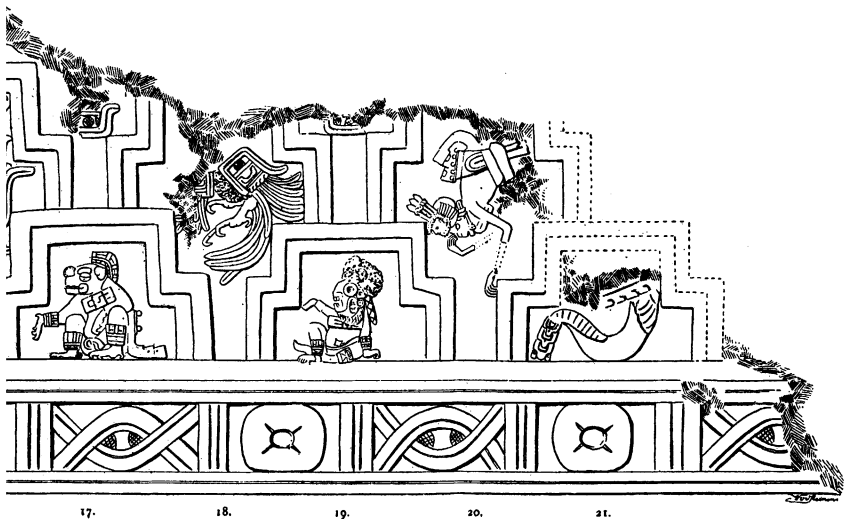
¹ Breton, *Archæology in Mexico*, *Man*, VIII, pp. 34-37. Seler, *Die Stuckfassade von Acanceh in Yucatan*, *Sitzungsberichte Königlich Preussischen Akad. d. Wissenschaften*, XLVII (1911), pp. 1011-1025.

² See Spinden, *Maya Art*, p. 213.





THE STUCCO FAÇADE AT ACANCEH, YUCATAN. (AFTER SELER)



17. 18. 19. 20. 21.

12 figures in the upper row, making a total of 23 in the middle band. In the lower row the third and fourth figures from the western end have been almost wholly obliterated. The inscription terminates at each end in the conventionalized figure of a large bird. The interstices between the panels at the top of the middle band contain sacrificial cups and feathers. The purpose of this paper is to interpret the symbols contained within the panels. Dr Seler has identified them with various animals, birds, and deities, and I accept this identification in many, but not all instances.

We shall read the symbols from east to west, or from right to left, in accord with the direction in which the figures face, reversing the numerical sequence used by Dr. Seler. Beginning then with the first legible symbol in the lower line on the right we perceive the figure of a rattlesnake. *Tzab-ek*, Rattle Asterism, is the Maya name of the Pleiades in Taurus.¹ The alignment of this star group readily suggests the rattle of the snake. Above the rattlesnake, in the next compartment on the left, appears a human figure plunging downward head-first. The writer has given reasons in a former paper for identifying this figure, as it appears in a zodiacal sequence in the Dresden codex, with the double sign Aries-Taurus. It seems to represent one of a group of stars called *Tzontemoc* by the Mexicans, whose fall from heaven with the lord of the dead was commemorated in the Quecholli festival held when the Pleiades were on or near the meridian at midnight, or when the sun was in the opposite sign Scorpio ruled by the lord of the dead. Now, just at this time the Taurid meteors were most numerous in the sky. They were so called because they emanated from a point in Taurus not far from the Pleiades, so it seems probable that this falling figure represented the descent of one of these meteors.² In that case, the first two symbols refer to the sign Taurus.

Next to the left in the lower line is a human figure with apparently abnormal proportions, suggesting the Mexican *Xololl*, lord of twins and of deformed and monstrous beings. He shares with

¹ Brinton, *Primer of Mayan Hieroglyphs*, pp. 34-35.

² See Hagar in *Proc. Internat. Cong. Americanists*, 16th Session, p. 284. Dr Seler thinks the face of the Acanceh figure is that of an ape. Nothing in the astronomical symbolism confirms this.

his twin brother Quetzalcoatl, the Divine Twin, the rulership of the sign Gemini, the Twins. Above him is the quetzal bird, symbol of the deity just mentioned, whom the Maya called *Cuculcan*. Therefore this second group of symbols seems to represent Gemini, the sign following Taurus in the zodiac.

Next in the lower line is a human figure with the head of a crocodile or some other amphibian. It is probably *Imix*, the eighteenth Maya day-sign. This name, according to Brinton and Förstemann, was originally *mex*, the cuttlefish, but it became corrupted and the meaning later associated itself with a crocodile or with some indeterminate sea-monster.¹ Each of the twenty Maya day-signs was assigned in sequence to a definite part of the zodiac, *Imix* to Cancer the Crab, the sign following Gemini.²

Above, an ara flies downward. It is the *Kinich Kakmo*, the Sun Eye and the Ara of Fire which descended from the sky upon an altar at the moment of the June solstice to consume the offerings. The sun is in the sign Cancer at this time, and the ara is perhaps the most prominent symbol of the sign. It was used by the Mexicans as well as by the Maya.³ The symbol of speech, song, or sound that issues from its mouth answers to the Cancer Uinal or months, *Kayab*, Song, and *Cumku*, Thunder, also to the day-sign *Cauac*, one meaning of which is given as music. The reference is evidently to the season of storms, the thunder being regarded as the celestial drum.⁴

The next zodiacal sign is Leo, and in the following panel we see the unmistakable figure of a puma or jaguar which denoted that sign in both the Maya and the Mexican codices. Beside him is the severed head of a human victim. Above is a pelican in the act of swallowing its food. This bird is not elsewhere used as a Leo symbol, so far as the writer is aware, but it is sufficiently appropriate. The Maya festival of fishermen and hunters held during the uinal month *Pob*, when the sun was in Leo, supports other evidence of the association of the Maya sign with the deity of the hunt, for

¹ See Förstemann in *Bul. 28, Bur. Amer. Ethnology*, pp. 566, 567.

² Hagar in *Proc. Internat. Cong. Americanists*, 17th Session, pp. 140 et seq.

³ Hagar in *Amer. Anthr.*, n. s., xv, pp. 19-23.

⁴ See Seler in *Bul. 28, Bur. Amer. Ethnology*, p. 668.

the ritual of the Maya annual festivals, like those of the Peruvians, Mexicans, and the Pueblo tribes of the United States, reflected the attributes of the sign through which the sun was passing at the time when the festival was held. The pelican is a greedy fisher which takes its prey by hovering over the water and plunging upon it when it appears. These birds often fly in large flocks, and their sudden swoop upon a shoal of fish is a striking and beautiful sight. The significance of the pelican as a Leo symbol is clearly indicated in this.

The next lower panel contains an animal which may be a lizard, corresponding with the fourth Mexican day-sign *Cuetzpálin* of Virgo, though its tail does not seem to pertain to the animal named. The iguana is frequently represented in association with *Kan*, the grain of maize, Maya day-sign of Virgo. The figure in the panel above is the maize deity eating a maize cake. He is dressed in dancing costume and carries a basket which may contain tobacco, as Dr Seler thinks, or food. This is the deity who presides over the Maya Virgo asterism. The dancing may refer to harvest rites.

Under Libra, the following sign, the rattlesnake appears again beside a peculiar crescent-shaped object which I cannot identify, but which, to judge from allied symbolism, may represent the lightning or thunderbolt. The snake here stands for *Chicchan*, the serpent, the second Maya day-sign under Libra. This word may conceal the name *chuch*, scorpion, the insect which represents Libra and Scorpio in the Mexican asterisms of Tezozomoc and Sahagun, and the latter sign in the fifth Maya day-sign *Tzec* or Scorpio. Above the rattlesnake is seen an owl, the recognized symbol of the Death God A of the Maya codices who rules the death-signs Libra and Scorpio.

In the lower Scorpio panel is figured a man seated in a chair and wearing an artistic head-dress, probably indicative of high rank.¹ His open mouth, from which issues a conspicuous symbol of speech, and his protruding tongue identify him with the Chilan or oracular priest, the Mexican *Tlahtoani*, who announces the responses which he was believed to obtain from the spirits of the dead. The animal

¹ See Seler in *Bul.* 28, *Bur. Amer. Ethnology*, p. 380.

tail behind him may be that of a scorpion. A similar figure represents Scorpio in the Borgian and other Mexican codices. The Maya held the Chilan in such veneration that when he journeyed he was almost invariably carried in a litter.¹

A bat is represented above the Chilan. This animal pertains to the Libra uinal *Tzotz*, or Bat, so we may be sufficiently presumptuous to suspect that the positions of the owl and the bat have been interchanged by mistake, or it may be that, as Libra and Scorpio were regarded in the codices as one double sign, care was not taken to differentiate the positions of the symbols relating to its two parts. The sign of speech or sound issuing from the mouth of the silent bat may indicate the oracular symbolism of the sign just referred to. The glyph of the evening star occurs twice beside the wings. The bat deity in the Maya codices devours the light as ruler of the subterranean cavern into which the sun sinks at setting.² This is probably a symbol of the autumnal equinox when darkness prevails over light and the evening star is appropriately placed with these symbols of darkness and night.

The next lower panel is partially obliterated, but what seems to be a tablet of some kind is supported upon two legs, probably of a puma, or ocelot, and at the top of the panel we seem to see the head and antlers of a stag. Both the ocelot and the stag are used as symbols of Sagittarius amongst the Mexicans, and the ocelot amongst the Maya also. *Mazatl*, deer, is the corresponding Mexican day-sign.

The long round objects to right and left should be cases of arrows or other weapons to correspond with the attributes of the war god who rules this sign. The upper panel is entirely destroyed.

Only a trace remains visible of the figure in the lower Capricornus panel. This trace includes a flame-like object which may pertain to the solstitial solar deity. Above is an unknown bird.

In the lower Aquarius panel there is the figure of a squirrel or rodent, suggesting the tenth Mexican day-sign, *Itzcuintli*, some form of rodent. But this day seems to pertain to the preceding zodiacal

¹ Landa (Brasseur ed.), p. 160.

² See Fewkes, God D, *Amer. Anthr.*, VIII, pp. 209, 210, 1895.

sign. The bird above may be a vulture, corresponding with the Aquarius symbol in the Borgiano and related codices.

Finally, the Pisces panel contains a frog which may represent the Virgo uinal *Uo*, Frog, as a catasterism. With it appears the glyph of the uinal twenty-day period. The spiral speech or sound symbol issuing from its mouth may refer to the noisy croaking of the frogs. The upper panel is obliterated. The inscription terminates on the east in a large conventionalized bird serpent, here, probably, symbolizing the sky deity.

We have now found symbols of nearly all the zodiacal signs in proper sequence within the panels of the middle band. Aries is missing, the figure which should represent it at the eastern end of the inscription being obliterated. Sagittarius is doubtful or completely obliterated, and Capricornus indefinite and obliterated, but the other signs are all represented, and from Taurus to Sagittarius every symbol has been identified, with a single exception. It is now a simple deduction that the sacrificial cups in the top band refer to those used in the zodiacal ritual of the monthly festivals, each festival being governed by a different zodiacal sign. And as for the planet symbol in the lowest band, the planets were naturally figured in association with the zodiac because they move only within it. The zodiac of Acanceh is unique in that its symbols are presented in a double sequence, that is with two symbols pertaining to each sign.

The symbols in the lower band may pertain to the asterisms themselves, those in the upper band to the deities governing them, as follows:

SIGN	ASTERISM	GOVERNING DEITY
Aries	(Missing)	(Missing)
Taurus	<i>Tzab-ek</i> , Rattle Asterism	<i>Tzontemoc</i> ¹
Gemini	<i>Xolotl</i> , Lord of Twins ¹	<i>Cuculcan</i> , the Bird-serpent
Cancer	<i>Imix</i> , Water Monster	<i>Kinich Ahau</i> , Lord Sun-Eye
Leo	<i>Balam</i> or <i>Tzakmul</i> , Jaguar	Pelican Deity
Virgo	<i>Cuetzpalin</i> , Lizard ¹	Maize Deity
Libra	<i>Chicchan</i> , Serpent	Death God ²

¹ Mexican name, Maya equivalent unknown.

² The positions of this and the Bat deity following should apparently be interchanged.

Scorpio	<i>Chilan</i> , Oracular Priest	Tzotz, Bat Deity
Sagittarius	Ocelot and Stag.	(Obliterated)
Capricornus	(Obliterated)	A Bird Deity?
Aquarius	<i>Itzcuinli</i> , Rodent ¹	Vulture Deity?
Pisces	<i>Uo</i> , Frog ²	(Missing)

The Acanceh zodiac differs from that of Izamal in which each mound bore only the symbol of the sign which governed it, but it is similar to the continuous band of zodiacal symbols presented in the mural paintings at Mitla, and the Mexican or Nahuatl influence is marked throughout these symbols.

We find in this zodiac the same sequence of symbolism which the writer has presented in previous papers on the star chart of Salcamayhua and the star lists of early writers, in the plan of the city of Cuzco and in the annual ritual of Peru, in the codices and ritual, the asterisms of Tezozomoc, Sahagun, and Duran, the names of months and day-signs and the plan of Teotihuacan in Mexico and in the codices and ritual, names of months and day-signs and the plan of Izamal in Yucatan. The writer believes that he has also found this sequence and hopes later to present it in the system of *ceques*, or shrine divisions, of Cuzco, on the inscriptions at Santa Rita in British Honduras, on the wall paintings at Mitla in Mexico, and in the annual ritual of the Pueblo tribes in Arizona and New Mexico. There is also evidence that some of the Mexican and Maya temples were dedicated to zodiacal signs. And between all these sequences the correspondence of the symbolism is marked. To the writer it seems that the existence of this nearly identical sequence in the instances named must be granted by those who examine the sources of information. If this be so it indicates the wide distribution and the importance of the symbolism on which it is based. Whether this zodiacal interpretation affords a satisfactory explanation of the oft-recurring sequence, the reader must judge. But, as the writer has previously pointed out, such a series of sequences cannot be produced either by chance or imagination, nor can an explanation which consistently explains them all in proper

¹ Mexican name, Maya equivalent unknown.

² Virgo as a catasterism.

order. And the explanation is based not on the possibility of perceiving in a certain group of stars one of the countless forms which imagination can locate there, but first upon positive evidence from star charts and lists, from ceremonials and place names, that certain forms were located in certain asterisms, and secondly on the fact that the other symbols consistently fit into the positions to which they must be assigned in the sequence, when the position of any one member of that sequence has been determined. Such is the basis on which rests the evidence of the existence and distribution of an American zodiac known from Peru to Arizona. And it should be added that the analogies between the various examples of this American zodiac are but little more striking than the analogy between it and the zodiacs of the Orient, whatever this fact may mean.

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